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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ'S MVR PARTY: PRIMARIES FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reason 1.4(d)
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Summary

1. (U) President Hugo Chavez's Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) held the first Venezuelan primaries April 10 to elect candidates for the August 7 parochial board and local councilmen elections. Delays and disagreements caused the postponement of the contests by several days in Zulia, Anzoategui and Carabobo States. MVR leaders named candidates from other pro-Chavez parties that had agreed to an alliance to some positions where MVR candidates had won primaries, sparking unusual protests by MVR members in Caracas and a petition before the Supreme Court. Despite the delays, accusations of fraud, and public divisions among local officials and members of the party, MVR officials said they were pleased with the process as a precedent. End Summary.

2. (U) President Hugo Chavez's Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) held primaries April 10 to elect candidates for the August 7 parochial board and local councilmen elections. The MVR's Electoral Commission, not Venezuela's National Electoral Commission (CNE), organized 2,400 voting centers to be open from 8 am to 6 pm. During the first primaries ever held in Venezuela, 19,632 MVR candidates competed for 5,618 electoral positions. MVR officials postponed the primaries originally scheduled for April 3 in every state but Zulia on April 1 because of delays delivering electoral material. On April 10, the MVR's Director of the National Tactical Command William Lara said that in over 80 percent of the centers, the process was running smoothly. However, he extended voting in many centers until the last person in line voted, and in some cases until April 11, because of long delays (5-10 hours) in opening. In Zulia, Anzoategui, Carabobo, Falcon and Monagas States, the MVR postponed the primaries until April 13 because of extensive delays in receiving electoral material. In some locations, delays continued beyond April 13.

3. (U) Despite setbacks, MVR officials said they would announce and submit final results to the CNE before the deadline for candidate nominations April 15 (subsequently extended by the CNE until midnight, April 18. On April 20, CNE President Jorge Rodriguez told the press more than 64,000 nominations had been received, and on April 21 he announced that almost 50,000 had been accepted by the CNE. (Note: Rodriguez did not give a breakdown of the nominations by party. Presumably, this total includes candidate nominations from those opposition parties that will be participating in the elections.)

It's Not So Bad...

4. (U) MVR Electoral Commission representative Hector Davila defended the process saying only 5 percent of the voting centers delayed primaries past April 10, and the total abstention rate was between 20-25 percent despite problems. Another member of the national MVR Electoral Commission estimated a 30-40 percent abstention rate on April 15. Most of the delays, Davila asserted, were because there were mistakes on the ballots, which made it necessary to reprint them at the last minute. Also, he said, MVR members were registered in parishes that corresponded to the CNE's electoral registry, which did not match the MVR's, so there was confusion about where people should vote. Overall, the local and national MVR leadership dismissed accusations of fraud and intentional delays. While the process did not run as smoothly as hoped, Lara noted April 13, it was the first primary the MVR had ever held, and MVR officials would ensure that it expressed the will of the people.

Sharing the Spoils

15. (U) In some locations, the MVR put forward candidates of other pro-Chavez parties who united with it in late March, replacing winners of the MVR primaries. The appointments angered some MVR members who protested in Caracas April 19, accusing Libertador municipal mayor Freddy Bernal of replacing primary winners with allied candidates for personal gain. On April 21, some local MVR officials submitted a

request to the Supreme Court to nullify the nominations. In a press release April 21, Lara defended the substitutions saying they were necessary to preserve the unity of revolutionary factions. On April 22, MVR National Director Francisco Ameliach promised "severe sanctions" against MVR leaders who had led protests against candidates nominated by appointment rather than through the primaries.

Delays and Allegations of Fraud

16. (U) Accusations of fraud levied against local and regional MVR electoral officials plagued the primary process. In Zulia State April 6, according to press reports, MVR members denounced preferential treatment for some candidates and accused local MVR officials of changing voting centers and deleting more than 4,000 people from the registries to ensure the candidates they supported won. In Barinas State, a local MVR election official accused members of the MVR, calling themselves the Dignity Team, of kidnapping him for 12 hours on April 18. Another MVR official accused the same group of burning down the Barinas MVR headquarters on April 19. In Nueva Esparta, the MVR's Regional Tactical Command suspended a member of the regional electoral commission for partisanship and "wrongdoing."

17. (C) Carabobo State's regional coordinator Luis Medina told PolOff April 21 that the experience was difficult because it was a first. However, as people became accustomed to "democratization" (the primary process), they would be more patient and less likely to jump to conclusions, accusations or protests. Archbishop Baltazar Porras told PolCouns that in Merida, where he resides, the MVR mayor had lamented to him that the state's MVR governor "had taken" all the nominations, depriving him of expected political patronage.

Comment

18. (C) While not trouble-free, the MVR primaries are a "first" which Chavez supporters will tout as credentials of their commitment to democracy in contrast to whatever process the opposition parties have used to pick their candidates. For some Chavez supporters, these primaries were indeed an end to Chavez's hand-picked candidates, although rumblings of fraud, obvious favoritism, personal gain and division marred the process. The primaries follow Chavez's Road Map for the Revolution, announced in December 2004, by increasing the organization and participation of his grassroots supporters. The National Electoral Council, which by law is charged with the supervision of all election related matters, was noticeably absent from the process in contrast to its assertion that it must watch over the Venezuelan Workers' Confederation elections.
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